

them to \* poor gentlemen.' If there had been any security that the class of \* poor gentlemen ' and knights would have been endowed and strengthened by the scheme, nothing could have been better for English society as it then was. But unfortunately the political machinery at Westminster made it almost certain that the nobles, who alone were strong enough to touch the Church, were strong enough also to take the lion's share of the spoils. The estates of the House of Lancaster and those of a dozen other great princes and nobles would have been doubled, and the troubles through which England passed with such difficulty in the next century would have been proportionately increased. If there was any evil that was as great a danger to England as the preponderating power of the clergy, it was the preponderating power of the nobility. If either had been much increased, even at the expense of the other, the Tudors might have found it impossible to save the Commons from the social bondage under which they laboured in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Although it is not likely that all these arguments occurred to men's minds at the time, it was clearly a suspicious circumstance that John of Gaunt had made the scheme of disendowment peculiarly his own. It appears to have been his design, in these last months of Edward the Third's reign, to establish his party firmly at Westminster by methods however violent and unpopular, and then to regain popular esteem as the champion of the laity against the clergy.<sup>1</sup> The distribution of even a small fraction of the Church lands would have bound many to his party, and the mere prospect of it had probably had some effect already. Such, it appears, was his ambition ; the plan was never actually put forward in the shape of bills before Parliament, but it has come down to us through the evidence of the monastic chroniclers on one side and Wycliffe on the other. The policy is not unlike that attributed by their enemies to the great Whig lords at the close of the Stuart period, when they were accused of the attempt to erect their personal supremacy on the ruins of the Established Church.

Lord Percy had fully entered into this part of the Duke's

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. Ang.* i 115, \* Interea non .... laboravit.<sup>1</sup>